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Hindrances to a Successful Ministry.

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PREACHED AT THE

ORDINATION OF JARED M. HEARD,

IN CLINTON, MASS.,

August 25, 1858.

By EDMUND H. SEARS.

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[From "The Monthly Religious Magazine and Independent Journal," for October, 1858.]

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LEONARD C. BOWLES.  
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# S E R M O N .

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"WE PREACH NOT OURSELVES, BUT CHRIST JESUS THE LORD, AND OURSELVES  
YOUR SERVANTS FOR JESUS' SAKE." — 2 Cor. iv. 5.

IF there be a special revelation of truth from God for the salvation of mankind, there must be minds prepared for its reception and transmission. And if there be minds prepared to receive and transmit it, they must act in such concert and harmony as to form a body and organism; and if they be a body and organism, they must have the various functions and offices of an organization. Therefore a *revelation*, a *church*, and a *ministry* whose work shall be special and distinctive, are things each of which necessitates the others. And it has always been found, and it always must be, that each one determines the other two, and they rise and fall together. If there be no distinctive divine revelation, then there need be no church as its steward, for the common light of nature falls into the minds of all. And if no church, then no ministry, for the common sentiment and the common literature are the universal utterance of what comes to all men alike, and they are its only authorized priesthood.

The occasion which brings us together presupposes our faith in a ministry whose office is special and sacred; which



is in the world and yet apart from it, as a heavenly persuasive to holiness. What more sacred, what more beautiful, than to bear the message of heaven to earth, for the lack of which the multitudes perish and die? And yet I need not say to you, that the Christian ministry has lost nearly all its adventitious honors and rewards; and some men are debating whether it had better not be abolished altogether. I do not regret this. I rather rejoice that this is so, for it will bring back the ministry to its ancient simplicity, when it asked nothing of the world and borrowed nothing of human glory, but spake only as the Holy Ghost laid upon it the great necessity of utterance.

As yet, however, we have not quite come to that. Society is in one of those periods of transition where the new is struggling with the old. And there are portents at which many are troubled and turning pale. The statistics tell us that, while the population increases, and crime and worldliness too, the numbers of the ministry are rapidly waning; and the churches, which once included nearly all the people, are only isolated communions among the heedless and busy multitudes. Without stopping to ask the meaning of this, or what it may portend to society, I deem it a question of exceeding interest and moment, — WHAT, IN THE PRESENT STATE OF THINGS, ARE THE CHIEF HINDRANCES TO A SUCCESSFUL MINISTRY? And I do not think there could be a question more becoming the place and the hour.

Let it not be said that the chief hindrance is a want of earnestness, — that earnestness will do anything and succeed anywhere. There is a great deal of this cant. And there is a great deal of earnestness which is nothing but the lurid blaze of self-love. The ministry of Christ in these times offers no lure to formalism, or the love of ease or self-seeking of any kind, and many of us break down under more earnestness than we can well carry; for unless it be wielded aright, and discharged clean to the mark, so far from being a

means of success, it may be the occasion of signal defeat and disaster.

Let me restrict myself to the range of thought which is offered in the text. "We preach not ourselves, but Christ Jesus the Lord, and ourselves your servants for Jesus' sake." The occasion was this. A church had been founded at Corinth through the simple delivery of the great message, Jesus Christ the resurrection. It was good news,—a future life and a Saviour! The believers came together for prayer and prophesying, and the Holy Ghost fell upon them, and the risen Christ was felt to be among them. Everything promised well. By and by, however, the native peculiarities of the Greek mind began to come out and be manifest. Several teachers appeared among them, and it began to be a dispute with them who preached the best, or most according to the Greek notion of æsthetic training. Some preferred Apollos, some Cephas, and some Paul, and the whole matter resolved itself into one of personal preference between this man and that, while God and eternal things were becoming secondary. Hence you see how Paul labors through whole chapters to sink the preacher in the theme; as in the text, "we preach not ourselves, but Christ Jesus the Lord, and ourselves your servants for Jesus' sake." This suggests to my mind two dangers that always beset the Church,—the substitution of preaching for worship, and the substitution of human discussions and theories about Christ for the living Christ himself.

Foremost among the hindrances to success in our religious communions I cannot hesitate to place *the substitution of preaching for worship*. Professor Park makes the computation, that, if the sermons preached in our land during a single year were all printed, they would fill a hundred and twenty million octavo pages. That is to say, 2,400,000 pages are poured forth every Sabbath of a year! Enough, one would suppose, to submerge the highest peaks of thought so deep that they never could be seen again. In the better days of the Church, preaching was a secondary matter, and

worship and communion and the melting of heart into heart were all in all. In fact, preaching, in the modern sense of the word, was not known at all in the primitive Church. Its form rather was that of prophesying; — that is, when the affections were aglow, and the intellect was fused in the fires of the heart, it poured out all its treasures spontaneously, and every meeting was a feast of love, and every motion of the heart was praise. No beating of the brain to make it yield up two sermons for the Sunday; no hammering out of creed-articles on theological anvils; no coming together of the church to look at a minister's performances! The risen and glorified Christ was among them, and they felt his presence as a sphere of the Divine Love, and needed no theories about the atonement, for they had the atonement itself. Immortality had just opened upon them its giant wonders and glories, and they did not need any sermons to *prove* the future life. Some of their hymns and chants are still preserved. They are addressed to the Saviour with whom they held personal communion, and that communion kept all the rills of tenderness trickling down the heart. Worship and communion were everything, and preaching, I repeat it, in the modern sense of the word, was the invention of later times.

Nor, let me add, did it ever become primary in the service of the Church till the wranglings of Protestantism had made it so. In the Catholic, and indeed all the mediæval Churches that preserve the primitive idea, prayer is placed before preaching, and the consequence is, that the mind even from infancy up is held in more reverent attitude towards sacred things, and a more subduing stillness in the presence of God. The old cathedral was itself a form of worship, — “a hymn to God sung in obedient stone,” — not built for Sunday alone, but open every day of the week, where the worshipper may come in from the noise of the world and dissolve his heart in the presence of God. The groves were the temples of heathen sacrifice, and after the



heathen became converted, and worshipped the true God, he turned his grove into a cathedral; and so the Gothic arch aspired with its lofty windows, its clustered columns, its rows of turrets and its leaves of tracery, as if his native forest had been turned to stone by the splendid magic of an enchanter.

I remember once hearing the younger Ware relate an incident of his travels in illustration of this very point. "I was passing," said he, "one of those old cathedrals, which are open every day of the week for those who wish to turn aside from the world and kneel and pray. My curiosity led me in. Nobody was there but an old soldier, who had laid by his sword and his helmet, and was kneeling before the Saviour upon the cross, and his hard features were relaxed and quivering, and the big tears were rolling over them like drops of rain. So absorbed was he, that he did not even know of my presence." The associations of the place, though they hovered in that awful silence and seclusion, were the most impressive sermon on the greatness of God and pardon, as the deepest need of man. And so, in every church where the idea of worship is primary, the first feeling when you enter it would be that of want, and the first movement of the soul upward a cry of penitence.

The worship of God and the communion of saints was the grand idea of the Sabbath ritual, and it so continued until doubtings and disputings displaced the Church idea for that of sect, and in fact turned the Church itself into a Babel. Then preaching becomes everything, and worship becomes almost nothing. The notion about church-going is to hear a sermon, and our whole Sunday edification is made to hinge upon that. With that notion you came up hither as hearers and lookers-on. Then everything centres about the person of the preacher, and you are chiefly concerned to see with what skill he can exhibit his talents, or defend the dogmas of his sect, or entertain you with his elocution, or play off the rockets of his imagination. And see

the consequences that must follow. The growth and prosperity, yea, the very being, of a religious society are made to depend on the personal, intellectual qualities of a single man,—a weak, frail mortal like yourselves. What a responsibility! And what a fatal inversion of the true order of things! And see the disastrous influence both on minister and people. He must preach,—preach twice every Sabbath; and he must make all the attractiveness and edification of Divine service depend upon that. The first question, before going to church, is, “Who is to preach?” And the first question coming home is, “How did you like *him*?” Prayer, in its large and vital sense, is forgotten. Probably during that service, while *God* was invoked, the audience were sitting about in lazy attitudes; but when the sermon comes, where the preacher is to exhibit *himself*, the attention is awake and the ear is open wide. And if he have the rare gift of playing skilfully upon the minds of an audience,—in short, the rare gift of eloquence,—the attention will continue to the close. But if it be a plain treatment of commonplace themes,—and all the themes of the Gospel ought by this time to be commonplace,—the hearer will probably droop as under the perfume of poppies, rather than under the spirit of the Lord. If it be one of those churches, however, in which truth is placed before life, somebody will probably keep awake to see whether he twangs properly upon the right phrases, or trips anywhere in the theological arithmetic which he learned at the seminary. If it be one of those congregations among whom faith in anything has become of no consequence, and the Bible has become rather obsolete, they will amuse themselves, probably, with the ingenuity of the preacher, as he spins out of his own brain his gossamer fancies, and sets them afloat above their heads in pretty balloon-bubbles,—that wretched substitute for the Gospel which is sometimes called originality.

Again, where preaching is substituted for worship, there is the besetting temptation to come together mainly for the

purpose of exposing other people's sins, — what are termed the sins of the age. It is our duty to expose in a right spirit the sins of the age; but if a congregation undertakes to *feed* on that, as its Sabbath-day nourishment, its food will assuredly turn to poison. What state of mind is so utterly hopeless and unchristian, as that which is produced by the constant *habit* of going to church to hear the evils of others exposed who are outside the Church, while ours have never been probed and laid bare? Uncharitableness, bigotry, self-righteousness, arrogance, conceit, censoriousness, spring up under such preaching and hearing as this, and when they think themselves rich and in need of nothing, they are inwardly the most poor and blind and naked of all men.

To sink the idea of worship in that of preaching, is to turn the Church into a school of criticism, or, worse yet, into a school of theological pugilism, fostering both in preachers and hearers a conceited intellectualism quite inconsistent with a humble reception of Jesus Christ. Hence all our divisions and subdivisions have sprung. Let prayer and fellowship be held primary, let a people keep close to the living Saviour in those heart-relations which diffuse his life through all the members, and no schism can ever take place; but let the idea of worship and fellowship be merged in that of preaching, and you will have schism without end. Hence those churches in which worship and fellowship are the supreme idea multiply and grow strong, mainly through their liturgical influence and devotional life; whereas the other sects protest, and protest, first against Rome, and then against each other, until their wretched Protestantism has broken them into fragments or crumbled them into atoms.

But this is not all. When a society depends mainly on preaching for its life and growth, it never can have a healthful and permanent ministry. Preachers at the best are finite; the well may be deep, but keep pumping and you will drain it before long. In plain language, and without figure, to furnish two sermons a Sabbath from year to year, which



shall of themselves keep fresh and living a people's interest in their place of worship, transcends the power of any but those of eccentric genius and endowments. Hence the ministry loses its permanence and its health of tone. The history of some parishes consists mainly of successive trials of all the preachers in rotation which are available, each one being emptied in turn of his freshness and originality, and left stranded by the way, that some new candidate may come forward and satisfy the awakened hunger after novelty and change. How different would be the state of things if the minister, instead of being a preacher on a platform, were a priest at the altar, a medium between the living Christ and the people; his first and highest work being this, — to have his own soul flooded with all of a Saviour's tenderness, mercy, and goodness, that thence it might flow down upon his people and diffuse itself through all their hearts and homes like the oil of gladness, insphering every old man and every little child, guiding their prayers upward to the seat of mercy, and bringing down upon them the Divine grace, sweet and constant as the suffusions of the early rain! Then devotion would always come before preaching, and the afternoon service at least of every Sabbath would be something more than coming together to hear another sermon that shall crowd the morning's lesson out of the memory. You would come because Christ was there, and the fellowship of the saints was there, and because, like the old soldier in the cathedral, you wanted to get away from the harsh clangor of the world's affairs, and lie broken-hearted before Him who hung bleeding upon Calvary.

I heard the other day of a small society which had struggled for some time to support preaching, till finally they gave over and shut up their church in despair. And there the church stands silent and deserted, and the Sabbath never more wakes a footfall within its aisles. What a "sign of the times" is this! what an omen of disastrous



change and the coming shadows of death! and what a comment, if not on our faith, at least on our methods of administration! The churches of Christ shut up and deserted, because no person who has passed through a divinity school can be paid for preaching a sermon! The communion of saints, the presence and fellowship of Christ, the coming of the Holy Ghost in summer gales, where prayer has opened the door for it among two or three that have met together,—all this goes for nothing unless somebody can be hired to preach a sermon. Why, in the first days of the Church the doctrines of the Gospel were lodged so securely in the heart that they preached sermons of themselves, and kept the heart-strings in vibration every hour. The spiritual world was an open reality, and lay on their souls like a bright and haunting presence; the glorified Christ was ever near with his “Peace be unto you”; they prayed without ceasing, and therefore the breezes of God’s spirit were always rippling on the surface of the soul. Therefore they came together, because they could not help it; for the social gathering was the sphere of the Divine Love, where every beating of the heart was a prayer, and the spontaneous utterance of the lips was a hallelujah. So it would always be if worship and devotion were living and primary, and the Church, instead of being a place for the spectators of one man’s performances, were a place where every soul had such part in a living ritual as should bring it under the strokes of God’s subduing love. And what hinders? Why not turn at least half the Sabbath to its ancient purpose? Why not have half the day for prayer and conference, for communion on the highest themes, for the study of God’s Word by the congregation itself, and not for another sermon to crowd the last one out of the memory? And why in this way should there not be a knowledge of Christ that should be ever growing, and a revival in the Church which should never know decline?

I shall not leave any room for being misunderstood. I

would be the last one to disparage preaching. Yea, rather I magnify its office. I put in a plea to diminish the quantity in order to improve the quality. I ask that the minister, instead of being made a talker for the exhibition of personal qualities, shall be made a priest for the coming of Christ into the midst of the congregation. And this brings me to my second topic, — the substitution of theories about Christ for the living Christ himself. And this seems to me to connect itself very closely with the mistake of putting preaching before worship; for if preaching be made primary, it will lose the breath of devotion, and sink into mere intellection, and run off into theories about Christ, or about anything that can furnish the entertainment of the hour. I do not know that I shall bring out with sufficient fulness the distinction between preaching Christ and preaching about Christ, but I think it to be broad and plain.

There are two modes of thinking about the Saviour. One represents him as an historical person who lived a great while ago, introduced a new code of morals, told about God as a Father, set a good example, worked miracles, and went away; since which we only study his words, imitate him as we can, and celebrate his death on communion Sundays. The other regards him as the "God with us," the ever-present Mediator through whom God yields himself to our hearts and fills out all our rituals; — a present Saviour and Helper, who has taken up all human experience into his own.

Speculate as we may about Christ, let us leave him to the Church as that Divine Humanity through which God is always coming, and through which the heavens are always passing into our souls. If we have only the historical Christ away back at the morning of Christianity, who simply projected his Church into time, and then went away and left it, alas for us as we drift away from that bright past into the deepening night of the ages! But if we have the Christ who went away that he might come nearer again,

who ascended that he might descend and “fill all things,” then the humblest disciple can always look up to a present Redeemer, who bears all his sufferings, forgives all his sins, cleanses away all his impurities, enriches and makes whole his broken and wasted nature, sheds the Comforter through his heart, to whom it turns like flowers that always drink the dew, — who is present at the most squalid death-bed of the truly penitent sinner, and spans it with his bow of peace.

I do not believe that any analysis in the power of man can ever reduce to scientific propositions the mystic union between Christ and the Father. Neither Trinitarian nor Unitarian, neither Arian, Sabellian, nor Socinian, can ever give you such a psychology of the Divine nature as to bring it all within the grasp of the finite understanding. But one thing I hold to be plain, — that man’s first, last, and deepest need is to have the awful gulf bridged over between himself and God, so that God and man may be in conjunction and harmony again ; so that God may pass over into humanity as its daily life, forgiveness, comfort, inspiration, and joy. And this cannot be except through the one Mediator, the man both human and divine, the God in Christ ever reconciling the world unto himself.

Herein lies the distinction between preaching Christ and preaching a religion concerning Christ. It is precisely the difference between the Christ of history and the Christ of experience and consciousness, — between a list of facts and propositions presented for my belief, and a living hand stretched out for me to grasp, and a living breast on which I can lean and weep my guilt away ; the difference between God as the abstraction of the Stoics, and God so humanized that he takes up all my sufferings and wants into his divine experience, and thence sends back into my nature all the throbbings of his tenderness. Hence the reason why the word God may be uttered without emotion, while the word Jesus opens the heart, and touches the place of tears. God out of Christ is a first principle, and gives no image to the



thought. God in Christ is humanized, and brought home to all my wants and necessities.

One truth stands out very plain on almost every page of the early Christian records,—the personal presence of the Saviour as a power in his Church, melting into all hearts, and making its ordinances alive; in fulfilment of his own promise, “Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the world.”

I do not disparage at all the historical Christ, or undervalue his work as a teacher. But is that enough? As well might a starving man say it was enough to be told that food was abundant across some chasm he has no means of crossing. What I need is, not to be told about the Father, but that the Father may impart of his nature to mine, and lift it up and glorify it; and unless he does this, no matter to me what his nature may be. What God is out of Christ and as an abstraction, I do not know. That word Father, taken from natural relations, themselves tainted with selfishness and sin, will not of itself reveal him; for the heathen before had applied it to the deity whom he made altogether such a being as himself. What God is in Christ, I know full well, for Christ is the image of all his attributes, and the refulgent expression of all his wisdom and love. “He that hath seen me, hath seen the Father, and how sayest thou then, Show us the Father?” How are all the false notions of God corrected, when we see his attributes imaged forth in the Son, and thence beaming down upon us! Looking through nature, we may mistake him; but there is no mistake here. In studying the creeds, we may mistake him; but there is no mistake here. All the hideous doctrines that obscured his attributes,—infant damnation, unconditional decrees, material hell-fire,—vanish the moment you see Christ, not as a man, nor as some third part of God, but as the full expression of God himself; for before that truth those false doctrines disappear like ugly spectres that troop before the dawn. What God is in Christ, we know full well, and hither we can come and



hang all our hopes, and lavish all our loves. It has seemed to me that the old sentiment of the love of God, a love truly active and taking up the whole strength of our being and bearing us clean away, was quite in danger of being lost, because the great doctrine of Mediatorship was being lost too. An abstract principle you cannot love. A God divided you cannot love supremely, for the heart is distracted and cloven. A God revealed in one Divine Person, and humanized by living sympathies, you *can* love, and there you can come and cling as your final refuge and your central rest.

But Christ has set an example for us! O yes, — lived a perfect life in the flesh, and shown us how we ought to behave! I will not decide for others, but, speaking out of my own experience, I do not need these fine examples. I have altogether too many of them for my comfort and peace. They rather discourage and taunt me, than help me along. I know too well what I ought to be now; I do not need anybody to tell me that, and mock me by passing before my sight the model of a faultless life. I strive after it and sigh after it in vain. Christ, the perfect human pattern, is away up in the sky, and that full-orbed perfection was reached by steps that I cannot climb; and though

“Wings at my shoulder seem to play,  
Yet rooted here I stand and gaze  
On those bright steps that heavenward raise  
Their practicable way.”

No! I do not need a Saviour that shall come and set an example for me to follow, but to come within me and lay a quickening hand upon my nature, and put soul into my weak and palsied virtue, and clothe me from within outward in the robes of his own innocence and righteousness.

“Rock of ages, cleft for me,  
Let me hide myself in thee.”

In this we have, not some theory of the atonement, but the atoning power itself always operating upon the hearts and

lives of men. It is simply both sides of Paul's grand composite doctrine, one God and one Mediator. With only the first, our theology is meagre and barren. The Jews had that, but it was powerless in making the heart soft and pliant, and their bigotry was infrangible as the flint beneath it. By the first, we preserve the doctrine that God is one. By the second, the one God turns his countenance upon us full of tenderness and grace. By the first, we preserve the Divine unity, and so far the intellect is satisfied. By the second, we apprehend the Divine humanity, and the heart is satisfied too. By the first, God dwells away in the eternal silences, and I cannot find him. By the second, he comes forth and meets the returning prodigal, and falls on his neck with the kiss of reconciling love. The first gives us one God, but he is unknown, and afar off. The second gives us one God again, and he is brought, O how marvellously near! By the first, I am told there is a sun beyond our firmament whose rays have never yet reached me, and I gaze through the empty spaces in vain. By the second, I take the glass, and the unknown luminary "swims into my ken," and I almost veil my senses before the grand and beautiful sight. With only the first, the Church must always look back, — back, with no hope of an ever-brightening future. With the second, she carries the living Christ into all her history, making all her ritual to glow with a sense of the Real Presence, and supplying the disciple with the Comforter every hour. With the first, the preacher may speculate on the Divine nature, and the unknown God, and the Christ of history, and preach himself and his ingenious philosophies, the Church meanwhile going to languishment and decay. With the second, the ever-present Mediator, its depleted and gasping theologies are raised up and filled with lifeblood, and because the Messiah is always coming, theology is always new.

Such is the Christ of the present hour, — Immanuel, God with us, — instead of one who died and has passed away. And

once believed in, how mighty would this truth be, and how would all other truths centre around it! What a meaning there would be in the Eucharist, if you knew and felt that Christ were present, and how much more sweet and tender would be its communings! How little should we preach ourselves, and how rather should we lose ourselves in him! How would all other topics take their tone and coloring from this, and be redolent of the spirit of Jesus! How would all reforms be pervaded by the spirit of the one great Reformer! How would the broken members of his Church gather again around the living centre, and speculations about the atonement be forgotten in the one atoning power that makes the believers at one with each other and with itself! And how would the growth of the churches depend, not mainly on the personal gifts of the preachers, but on Him who walks in the midst of the seven golden candlesticks, and keeps their lights burning with everlasting brilliancy!

Christian friends and brethren, may yours be such a church and such a ministry. May the living Christ be in each, and out of him may you have springs of prosperity and peace which shall never fail. The Church is dead, morality is dead, religion and worship are dead, truth itself is dead, being a dry abstraction, except so far as Christ comes within them, and by his personal presence makes them glow with the Comforter and live. So may he come and abide with you!

And you, my brother! May he come to you and make your work delightful. That done, it is its own exceeding great reward. More than all the glittering prizes of wealth and ambition are the satisfactions that await you, if only the living Christ be the soul of your endeavors; for that will make all your burdens light, and turn your work into song! I may not encroach upon another exercise of this occasion; but having known through what struggles, trials, and disappointments you have persevered unto the end, and finally brought your powers as a whole offering to this work, I

may utter this word of hope and gratulation. May the aspirations of years, often baffled, be realized now! And may the blessing be yours, my brother, which always waits on singleness of purpose in the highest work which God has committed to man!











